Mental Health-Friendly Workplaces Are Good for Employers, Employees

When people talk about their jobs, they may not use the term "mental health-friendly." But maybe they should. Just ask Cara Hansen, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder (once called manic depression), when she was working at a national financial services firm in the Milwaukee area.

Hansen, a human resources professional, knew where to find help. She went to the company's Employee Assistance Program, found a therapist, and started learning how to cope with her illness.

What she did not do was quit her job, get fired, or scale back her career goals.

"For a long time, it was hard to accept this diagnosis because of the stigma associated with mental illness ... especially in the workplace," Hansen said. "But, once I understood that this actually is a real and treatable illness, not a personal defect, and started getting treatment, I became a better contributor to the company. I was able to feel better and be more productive."

In fact, when her company moved its headquarters to Chicago, they asked her to make the move and to take on a new job. She decided to stay in the Milwaukee area, however, and went to work for another company.

At the new company, Hansen survived a large downsizing and earned consistently high ratings. But it was here that she – and the company – learned the hard way about the difference between mental health-friendly and unfriendly workplaces.

After being on the job about two years, Hansen requested a temporary 32-hour work schedule for six weeks, telling her supervisor about her illness for the first time. He said he would consider her request. That evening however, he called her at home and asked her to resign.

Shocked and confused, she consulted her doctor. Together, they decided that, based on the manager's refusal to accommodate a temporarily reduced schedule or to consider any other options, the only alternative was for her to go on medical leave. This meant that rather than having a temporarily reduced schedule, she went on short-term disability, with full pay and benefits, for several weeks.

Now the Director of Community Outreach at the Mental Health Association in Milwaukee County, Hansen believes her story is an example for employers and employees alike. "Buying into the negative myths and stereotypes about people with mental illnesses is bad business," she said. "In many instances, it's illegal and lets very competent, motivated people slip through your fingers."

Many people do not realize that mental illnesses are common and treatable. And many people with serious mental illnesses do not seek or receive treatment for a number of reasons; in 2002, fewer than half of adults with serious mental illnesses received treatment. The common reasons include cost, fear, not knowing where to go for services, and concern about confidentiality and the opinions of neighbors and community.

This fear of what people may think – the stigma that surrounds mental illness – is a serious barrier to acceptance, treatment, and recovery. When it comes to many employment issues, the Americans with Disabilities Act protects people with mental illnesses. But there are also things that anyone can do to counter stigma on the job.

• Share the facts. Let others know that mental illnesses are common and treatable and that people recover from these illnesses.

• Treat all co-workers with respect and dignity.

• Avoid labeling people by using terms like "crazy," "wacko," and "loony."

Hansen is sharing her story as part of the Elimination of Barriers Initiative, which is working to break down the barriers that keep people from seeking treatment for mental illnesses. The initiative is sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Center for Mental Health Services, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

SAMHSA also offers a toll-free number, (800) 789-2647 (English/Spanish) and (866) 889-2647 (TDD), for information on stigma and mental illnesses, including referrals to local mental health resources. For more information, call the toll-free number or visit *www.allmentalhealth.samhsa.gov*.